

The Multiple Contents of Experience: Representation and the Awareness of Phenomenal Qualities

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contents of perceptual experience, and focuses in particular on the relation between the representational aspects of an experience and its phenomenal character. It is argued that the Critical Realist two-component analysis of experience, advocated by Wilfrid Sellars, is preferable to the Intentionalist view. Experiences have different kinds of representational contents: both informational and intentional. An understanding of the essential navigational role of perception provides a principled way of explaining the nature of such representational contents. Experiences also have a distinct phenomenal content, or character, which is not determined by representational content.

KEY WORDS:

Perceptual experience; perceptual content; critical realism; phenomenal qualities; representation; intentionalism; causal theory of perception; navigational account; Wilfrid Sellars;

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1 Introduction: Two Aspects of Experience

Perceptual experiences have two important features. It is widely agreed that they have some kind of representational content, in virtue of which an experience can be said to be “of” or “about” the particular object (or state of affairs) that the subject perceives.

Experiences also have a distinctive phenomenology: when, for example, I see a reddish apple in normal circumstances, I become aware of a range of phenomenal qualities, such as a roughly round shape and a pattern of reddish colour. Such qualities are immediately present in my consciousness in a way that distinguishes experiences from pure intentional states such as occurrent thoughts.

The expression ‘the content of experience’ can be interpreted either in a narrow or in a broad sense. Understood in the narrow sense, content equates with what is represented in some manner by the experience; experiences have accuracy conditions. Understood in a broad sense, the content of experience refers to whatever the subject is conscious of, including any aspect of the phenomenal character of experience that is not captured by the representational nature of experience.

In this paper I shall construe the idea of content in the second, broader sense, and my concern is with how the different features of conscious experience are related. My particular focus will be the following question: When a subject S has a perceptual experience in perceiving a particular object X, what is the relation between the representational nature of that experience, and the fact that, in having the experience, the subject is immediately aware of phenomenal qualities? In concentrating upon this issue I shall defend the Critical Realist theory of perceptual experience developed by Wilfrid Sellars, and contrast his position with the Intentionalist view, in particular with versions put forward by Michael Tye, and by John McDowell.¹

According to the Intentionalist view, in virtue of being in a representational state, the subject is directly perceptually conscious of an external physical object, of the very thing perceived. The perceptual consciousness of physical objects is direct, in that it is not rationally based upon any prior conscious state. It is also immediate: the subject is aware of phenomenal qualities that belong to that external object, and is not aware of qualities belonging to an inner object, which somehow mediate the awareness of the external object perceived.

¹ See Sellars (1956), (1975) (1978) and (1982); for the Intentionalist view, see in

The objection to the Intentionalist view is that it is too simple, and cannot adequately account for the different aspects of experience. Experiences have multiple contents. There are different senses of ‘representation’ that need to be carefully distinguished. None of them supports the Intentionalist position on phenomenal qualities. The phenomenal aspect of experience is a feature that is, in important ways, independent of its representational nature. In advancing these criticisms I shall suggest we should instead accept the two-component view of experience that derives from Sellars’s Critical Realism.

2 *Intentional Direct Realism:*

Those who adopt the Intentionalist view of experience hold that phenomenal content is a kind of intentional content. The representational and phenomenal aspects of experience are essentially connected. The idea is that the relation between the two aspects of experience can be expressed by the following thesis:

IDR If a subject S has a perceptual experience E in perceiving an external physical object X, then, in virtue of that experience E having a certain kind of representational content, the subject S is aware of phenomenal qualities belonging to the object X that S perceives.

I call this view ‘Intentional Direct Realism’, or IDR for short, in order to distinguish it from non-intentionalist forms of Direct Realism – by which expression I include the Naïve Realism that Michael Martin upholds, and also the position sometimes termed the ‘relational view’ of experience.²

To illustrate the IDR thesis I will begin by considering Michael Tye’s position, which has the virtue of setting out a version of IDR explicitly. Many philosophers consider that perceptual experience is “transparent”: in having an experience, the subject is somehow directly aware of the object perceived. Tye accepts the transparency view. In working out the consequences of this position he advances a number of claims about the phenomenal character of perception, and the subject’s awareness of phenomenal qualities.

According to Tye, ‘Phenomenal *character* is one and the same as representational content that meets certain further conditions’ (45). In seeing a surface of, for example, a ripe tomato, you are directly aware of phenomenal *qualities*. The red phenomenal quality you are aware of belongs to the surface of the tomato you see. Tye states that it is true that ‘...when you introspect, you are certainly aware of the phenomenal character of your visual experience’ (47). However, according to Tye, ‘phenomenal character itself is not a quality of your experience to which you have direct access’ (47). He claims: ‘Intuitively, the surfaces you see directly are publicly observable physical

² See, for example, Martin (2002); and also Campbell (2002).

surfaces' (46); and further: 'None of the qualities of which you are directly aware in seeing the various surfaces look to you to be qualities of your experience' (47).

For Tye, it is therefore important that phenomenal *character* and phenomenal *qualities* be carefully distinguished. '...visual phenomenal character is representational content of a certain sort – content into which certain *external* qualities enter' (48); the connection is that, in so far as 'phenomenal character involves the surface qualities of which the subject of the visual experience is directly aware ... these qualities at least partly *constitute* phenomenal character' (48). By virtue of the representational content of your experience, you are aware, immediately and directly (and in a less restrictive sense), of phenomenal qualities belonging to external objects. 'They are qualities of external surfaces...if they are qualities of anything' (49).³

What matters for my purposes is that Tye is committed to three claims about perceptual experience:

- (1) Having an experience with representational content essentially involves the awareness of phenomenal qualities, just in virtue of the representational nature of the experience;
- (2) These phenomenal qualities are surface qualities of external objects, which at least partly constitute the phenomenal character of experience (at least for vision, although analogous claims can presumably be advanced for sound and other sense-modalities).
- (3) The subject is not directly aware of any other entities that mediate awareness of the external physical object perceived.

The worry expressed by Tye is that if we countenance any kind of mediating entity or state in the subject's awareness of external objects, then the resulting position will collapse into a form of the sense-datum theory, and be liable to all the well-known criticisms facing such accounts.⁴

The position of John McDowell in *Mind and World* and subsequent writings is harder to categorise precisely. McDowell disagrees with Tye on issues connected with the role of nonconceptual content, yet he upholds a position that bears important similarities to Tye's.

³ Tye (2000). Most of the italics are added.

⁴ See Tye (2000), p. 45 and p. 84; compare also Shoemaker (1994), who expresses similar worries. However, it is arguable that Tye ignores the distinction that should be made between *sense-data* accounts, and the *Critical Realist* interpretation of inner states. I discuss some important differences between them in my article on Sense-data (2007).

Thus it is clear that McDowell is committed to claim (3), when he states:

...when we see that such-and-such is the case, we, and our seeing, do not stop anywhere short of the fact. (p.29)

Experience, for McDowell, involves openness to the world. But experience is also inextricably fused with conceptual content. Thus McDowell argues:

We must not suppose that receptivity makes an even notionally separable contribution to its co-operation with spontaneity. (p.51)

According to McDowell, experience is entirely ‘in the space of reasons’ (p.xix): experiential intake has conceptual content right from the start (p.9).⁵ There is no awareness of phenomenal qualities independently of the conceptual content of the experience. Arguing in a similar vein in his *Woodbridge Lectures*, McDowell claims there that we do not need to analyse perceptual experiences as involving a distinct nonconceptual sensory component, since experiences are conceptual episodes that are already ‘shapings of visual consciousness’ (p. 442).⁶ Experiences, like thoughts, are directly related to their objects – the only difference between them is that in experience the subject becomes immediately conscious in a phenomenal manner of qualities belonging to the external object that is the focus of the subject’s awareness. McDowell therefore appears to be committed to something close to Tye’s claim (1) above.⁷

Tye and McDowell disagree about the exact nature of the representational content of experience. For McDowell, the content of experience is a conceptual episode of a special perceptual kind (p.440). For Tye, the content of a visual experience is nonconceptual. Nevertheless, the two views share some common ground. Both interpret perceptual experience as a single, unified state. In virtue of having some form of *representational* content, the experience enables the subject to be immediately aware of the qualities of external objects – such qualities are immediately *present* in the subject’s consciousness.

⁵ These page references are all from McDowell’s (1996).

⁶ In his (1998a) p. 442.

⁷ However, for criticism of McDowell’s general position, and especially of his relation to Sellars over the proper analysis of experience, compare deVries (2006).

Such views stand in marked contrast to the Critical Realist analysis of perceptual experience advocated by Wilfrid Sellars.⁸ The Sellarsian analysis is rightly characterised by McDowell as recognising two distinct components in experience. The first component is a conceptual representational episode that is “in the space of reasons”, an intentional episode directed at the external objects we perceive. But there is, in addition, a second component in experience, which is both nonconceptual and nonintentional.⁹ This component is a sensory state, comprising the immediate (nonconceptual) consciousness of phenomenal qualities. In contrast to Tye and McDowell, Sellars interprets the phenomenal qualities of experiences as belonging to inner sensory states, not to outer objects. It is a mistake to think of perceptual experience as completely transparent. On the Critical Realist view, experiences are distinct from, but causally related to, the external objects we perceive.¹⁰ One general consequence of the Sellarsian picture is that experiences have a multiplicity of contents, which are of different kinds.

What are we to make of this fundamental disagreement? My aim in this paper is to defend the Sellarsian view of experience by arguing for two complementary theses:

- (1) The appeal to the *representational* character of perceptual experience cannot explain how any phenomenal qualities belonging to an external physical object are made immediately *present* to the subject’s consciousness.
- (2) The Sellarsian two-component view of experience can provide a satisfactory explanation of the *multiplicity* of contents, and hence of how experience can be representational in more than one sense. Moreover, it provides an analysis of experience that is best able to explain the connection between such representational aspects and the phenomenal qualities of which the subject is immediately aware in having an inner experience.

My main focus will be on establishing the first claim. I shall explain why the phenomenal character of experience should be treated as an independent dimension of consciousness, one that is distinct from at least some aspects of its representational nature. In defending the second claim, what I say will be of a more speculative nature.

⁸ Sellars defends this theory in his (1956) and in later writings such as (1975), (1977) and (1982).

⁹ Throughout, I shall interpret ‘conceptual’ broadly, to refer to both “high” and “low” conceptual abilities. Thus, in the sense employed here, exercising a concept involves classification, but need not imply self-awareness or linguistic abilities. See Smith (2002), chapter 3.

¹⁰ See in particular the complex analysis of the role of the sensory component of experience that Sellars defends in his (1982).

Without attempting to explore all the available options in detail, I shall show why there are at least good reasons for treating perceptual experiences as having a *multiplicity* of representational contents, and, in addition, a phenomenal character that is not exhausted by any of these.

3 *Representation and Presentation:*

I shall begin by defending the first claim. Upholders of IDR frequently assume that there is some close resemblance between perceptual representation and the purely conceptual representation that is involved in thoughts. McDowell, for example, makes it explicit throughout his *Woodbridge Lectures* that he considers thoughts and perceptions to have essentially the same underlying structure. They are both conceptual goings-on that have “objective purport”.¹¹ In different ways, through the exercise of our conceptual capacities, such episodes put us directly in touch with objects in the outside world. The difference between them is that episodes such as seeings involve a distinctive attitude of mind – the concepts exercised “shape” the subject’s *visual* consciousness, as we noted above. But our perceptual experiences reach to the external objects we perceive; it is claimed that they do not involve a mediating inner state of awareness. In veridical perception, according to McDowell, ‘we are open to the world’. We can understand experience ‘... as a matter of states or episodes in which objective reality is directly available to the subject.’¹² McDowell is therefore committed to the claim that by virtue of this distinctive visual consciousness, the subject is immediately aware of phenomenal qualities. These belong to the outer object perceived, and not to inner states of the subject. Only if he is prepared to accept a formulation along such lines can McDowell consistently maintained his version of the Direct Realist view.

A major problem that faces Direct Realist accounts of perception, of all kinds, consists in explaining how the immediate awareness of the phenomenal qualities belonging to outer physical objects is possible. There is overwhelming evidence that inner token states of consciousness, such as pains, other bodily sensations, hallucinations, synaesthesia and the like, supervene upon the subject’s brain states alone.¹³ In such cases phenomenal qualities are immediately *presented* in the consciousness of the subject. There is no generally accepted account of how the brain gives rise to consciousness, but the occurrence of such states constitutes an existence proof that

¹¹ See McDowell (1998a) lectures I and II.

¹² McDowell (1998b), p. 411.

¹³ See for example Gray (2004), ch 2, 10 and 13. An experience is “inner”, as I use the expression here, if it is a conscious state with phenomenal qualities, and a state of that type could possibly occur independently of any particular given object outside the subject’s skin. Throughout, in speaking of *inner* phenomenal states, and contrasting them with *outer* physical objects, I leave open questions about their fundamental ontological status; thus it might turn out that such inner states can be identified with physical states (or, perhaps not with physical states as currently understood).

neural activity confined within the subject's body is sufficient for such inner states of consciousness to occur. How such states arise is at present a mystery that faces all current theories of mind and perception. What remains an *additional* mystery, one that affects all Direct Realist theories, is how the subject's consciousness could possibly reach out into the external world, through perception, so as to make immediate contact with features of mind-independent reality.

Without a positive account of the nature of the direct perceptual relation supposedly connecting the subject with a given external physical object, the Direct Realist is unable to explain what links the subject's consciousness with the specific external object perceived, rather than some *other* distinct object in the locality of the perceiver (which may indeed to all intents and purposes appear to be an exact match). The problem can be posed by way of example: in virtue of what facts is my present perceptual experience, as of something red and round, an experience *of* one particular red juggling ball X and not *of* an exactly similar red ball Y situated nearby? In the absence of a *positive* account of differences between perceiving, veridical hallucination and illusion, Direct Realism cannot explain how experiences come to have the *individual* contents they do. The theory threatens to become *parasitic* upon the causal theory of perception. The claim that the experience is in part constituted by the object perceived is thrown into doubt.

On non-intentional versions of Direct Realism, such as the Naïve Realism defended by Martin, in being perceptually related to an outer object, the subject is immediately aware of the sensible properties of the object. Such properties might be identified with the phenomenal qualities a subject experiences in veridical perception. I have criticised this version of Direct Realism at length in other work, and for the purposes of this present paper I am assuming that it can be discounted.¹⁴ If the intentional direct realist is to defend an alternative account of experience, it needs to be shown how the representational nature of experience enables the subject to have immediate consciousness of qualities that belong to mind-independent objects. If there is no *real* (i.e., non-intentional) relation linking the subject and the perceived object, how can external qualities be immediately *present* in consciousness?¹⁵

When considered from the perspective of Sellars's two-component theory of experience, the advocate of IDR appears to be conflating two quite distinct functions carried out by experience. The first is that in directly grasping a state of affairs, the subject exercises concepts (of a high or low form) in representing and classifying that state; the second is that in being aware of phenomenal qualities, something is immediately present in the subject's consciousness. *Representational* consciousness is a very different from that form of phenomenal consciousness in which qualities are made

¹⁴ As I have argued in my (1998), (2000) and (2007).

¹⁵ On the "Act-object" account of experience held by writers such as Moore, the relation between the subject's consciousness and the object of acquaintance was considered to a real, non-intentional relation: see the various papers in Moore (1922).

immediately *present*.¹⁶ Although both forms of consciousness are essential for perceptual experience, they still need to be distinguished. On the Critical Realist view defended by Sellars, the phenomenal qualities present to consciousness belong to the subject's inner states, which cause and guide representational episodes directed at outer objects.¹⁷ External objects may determine the individual content of experiences, but do not enter into the contents of experience in a way that allows the subject to be immediately conscious, in a phenomenal sense, of their intrinsic qualities.

My strategy will be to argue that there is no clear account of the notion of representation which will give the advocates of IDR what they want. When we canvass the available options, we cannot make sense of a notion of representation which engages in the required way with the demands both of an adequate phenomenology of experience, and also of a plausible analysis of perception. No clear account of representation can explain how the subject becomes aware of qualities belonging to external objects, so that they are made immediately present in consciousness.

4 *Three Conceptions of Representation:*

One conception of representation ties it closely to the notion of information.¹⁸ To say that a given state of type F represents another state of type G is, roughly speaking, to imply that there is a co-variation between states of the first type and states of the second, so that one is a reasonably reliable indicator of the other. Such co-variation may be underpinned by causal laws. Stalnaker expresses what he describes as a crude version of this sense of information as follows:

One thing contains information about another if there are causal and counterfactual dependencies between the states of one and the states of the other.¹⁹

There are, of course, familiar problems with such accounts of information, if the attempt is made to ground a useful conception of representation upon them. There is a particular problem about which counterfactual dependencies are to count in determining what is considered to be the relevant causal relation between the two kinds of state. At the very least, any attempt to defend the idea that there is a viable representational relation, based upon causal co-variation, will have to specify the kind of context in which the relevant

¹⁶ As Sellars urged throughout his writings on perception, and particularly in later work, from his lectures in *The Structure of Knowledge* (1975) onwards.

¹⁷ See in particular the account Sellars gives in his (1978), and my (2007) chapter 9.

¹⁸ The classification of representation in what follows corresponds in some ways to Pierce's threefold division of signs into natural indexes, icons and conventional signs.

¹⁹ Stalnaker (1998).

causal connections operate, perhaps by appealing to the idea of optimal circumstances.²⁰ I shall return to this issue in the next section. But there is, in any event, a further problem that faces the advocate of IDR in attempting to appeal to this form of representation to illuminate the thesis.

Suppose we allow that, relative to a given context, there is a sufficiently clear notion of the appropriate causal co-variance between the two types of state F and G for us to claim, on a principled basis, that a state of type F represents a state of type G by virtue of carrying information about it. In many situations this may be a plausible claim to make when we consider, from a third-person perspective, the overall system within which F and G are connected. The perceptual systems of animals provide one context in which such causally based co-variations hold. It is plausible to claim that stages in an organism's visual processing system represent, in an informational sense, aspects of the surrounding world (as I shall spell out more fully in section 6).

There are two difficulties with appealing to such accounts in trying to explicate the IDR thesis. The chief one is that there is no essential connection between information carrying and consciousness. A subject can be in physical states that are characterised as containing information about aspects of the outer world, without having any conscious awareness arising directly from the existence of such states. Marr's theory of vision, for example, posits subpersonal mechanisms in the brain that are not available to consciousness in any direct manner.²¹ Blindsight provides an example where the subject represents aspects of the surrounding scene without any phenomenal qualities being presented in experience.²²

There is a second, related difficulty. This arises from what may be called the "location of consciousness" problem. Suppose that an experiential state of the subject carries (in the informational sense) a given representational content C; suppose also, that in having such a state, the subject is also made immediately aware of phenomenal qualities. It does not follow that the qualities the subject is conscious of, in a phenomenal sense, are qualities that belong to the external objects perceived. Simply by virtue of being in a conscious state X that somehow informationally represents some other state of affairs Y, the subject need not be aware of phenomenal qualities that belong to the represented state Y. Any qualities present in experience could be qualities that belong intrinsically to the information carrying state itself; or they may instantiate a distinct, causally connected inner state.²³

Consider, by way of an illustration of this point, the example of pain states. It might be claimed that when I experience a painful burning sensation in my hand because I

²⁰ See the worries expressed by Cummins (1989), and Dretske's interesting attempts to deal with this issue, in, e.g. (1988).

²¹ See Marr (1982).

²² See generally in connection with this point the work of Milner and Goodale (1995).

²³ Compare Siegel (2005) section 7.1.

accidentally touch a hot stove, I informationally represent the fact that there is a hot object momentarily adjacent to my skin. But the sensation of pain of which I am aware is not, on those grounds alone, to be identified with the properties of either my hand or of the external object I touch.²⁴ The pain is a quality of my inner state, not of the hot stove outside my body. Nor are there any good grounds for the claim that the pain state supervenes upon the complex physical system which includes my body and, *in addition*, the stove.

A parallel point applies in the case of perceptual experiences. Imagine I have a visual experience in seeing a red ball; I am phenomenally conscious of a red expanse. For the advocate of IDR, my experience is an informational representational state of some kind. But in being aware of phenomenal qualities, which state am I immediately conscious of? Is it the inner representational state in my mind, or is it the outer, physical state of affairs that my experience is supposed to represent? If the former, then the qualities phenomenally present in my consciousness do not belong to the external object. They belong to the state that informationally represents aspects of my surroundings.

If the latter option is chosen, and it is claimed that the phenomenal qualities present in consciousness belong to the represented state of affairs, then the advocate of the IDR thesis owes an explanation of how it is that visual experience differs from pain experience. It is true that in perception our *concepts* focus directly on the external objects we perceive. But it still needs to be shown how we can be aware, in a sensory manner, of qualities that belong to external objects, outside the body. To claim that the subject becomes immediately conscious of qualities belonging to the state represented, just by virtue of representing it informationally, is to beg the very question at issue. Why should representing a state of affairs make anything present, in a phenomenal sense, to the mind? Note, here, that it might be held on *quite different* grounds that I am immediately aware of the very red ball in my surroundings – for example if the Naïve Realist position defended by Martin is adopted. But, as observed earlier, Naïve Realism is a very different position from the Intentional Direct Realism that is our concern here.

Michael Tye appears to be guilty of making this question-begging move in claiming in his (2000), p.47, that:

...when you introspect, you are certainly aware of the phenomenal character of your visual experience...[but] the phenomenal character itself is not a quality of your experience to which you have direct access. (p.47)

²⁴ It is true that on certain views of sensations, I am representing a part of my body, the injured hand (see, e.g. Armstrong (1968) chapter 14). Apart from other difficulties, this still doesn't explain how my consciousness might include any non-bodily state of affairs.

Because experience is, supposedly, transparent, ‘the objects of which you are aware are the external ones making up the scene before your eyes.’ (p.47). As we noted earlier, Tye goes on to claim:

Visual phenomenal character is representational content of a certain kind – one into which external qualities enter. (p.48)

However, this slippery reference to *externalist* conceptions of content can be misleading. Tye is not making the more modest, and plausible, assumption that the propositional content of the experience can be identified, in a formal sense, by reference to the external state of affairs the subject sees. The claim is not about which state of affairs is seen, in a merely extensional sense. Tye’s claim is about the phenomenology of experience, about how things seem subjectively, from the subject’s own point of view. Thus he goes on to state:

Still there are qualities of which the subjects of visual experiences are directly aware via introspection. They are qualities of external surfaces ...if they are anything.

Such qualities quite clearly *are* “of anything”: they are actually present in experience: seeing the ball to be red is a real state that differs from seeing it to be orange. Hence Tye is committed to the claim that experience is a representational state, in which phenomenal qualities belonging to external objects are made immediately present to the subject. But the question of how it is that, by being in some kind of representational state of mind, I can become immediately aware of qualities belonging to objects in the external world, is the very problem we are trying to explain. On the basis of the views examined so far, it is quite unclear how a purely informational representational state can play this additional role.

One argument for thinking that in perception the subject is aware of phenomenal qualities attaching to the represented external object appeals to the differences between the way that the mind is directed in perceiving a physical object, and in experiencing a pain. In the former case, it might be argued, the subject’s intentional state focuses upon the outer world, whereas in experiencing a pain, the attention is directed inwardly. Connected with this truth is the thought that in perception, experience is transparent. There is certainly a difference between the two kinds of case. But it can be fully accounted for in terms of the operation of the purely conceptual aspect of experience. At the level of our perceptual thoughts, transparency does hold. The subject’s conceptual states refer directly to what is in the external surroundings. This does not entail,

however, that there is no inner, mediating phenomenal aspect at the nonconceptual level. As I have argued elsewhere, experience is not completely transparent.²⁵

A second notion of representation is based upon the relation of resemblance. Two items that are causally unconnected can resemble each other in certain respects if they share certain common features, and in virtue of this resemblance one of them may be claimed to represent the other. There are many issues raised by this conception of representation. A first point is that for a representation of the resemblance kind to be possible, there need to be some structural features in common between the representing state and what is represented. On the basis of a loose spatial isomorphism, atoms can be said to resemble solar systems. The second issue is connected with this. Sellars, and more recently Lowe, argue that there can be cross-categorical resemblances.²⁶ When Berkeley denied the coherence of any resemblance between sensory items and entities that did not belong to the general category of ideas, he overlooked the possibility of a structural isomorphism based upon shared higher-level properties and relations. It makes sense, for example, to claim that there is a formal resemblance between an auditory hallucination of a sequence of ascending notes, and a physical sequence of three sound events involving the increased frequency of the vibration of strings. One further and important point to note is this: if a subject takes something present to represent an object or state of affairs – for example, in taking a cartoon face to represent a prominent politician – then that subject must be exercising concepts of some kind. So in order to appreciate the resemblance, the subject must be in some kind of intentional state focused in part upon the object represented.

Nevertheless, this resemblance notion is of no help to IDR, for much the same reasons that the informational sense provides none. If a subject has an inner experience that represents, by resemblance, some outer object, that resemblance relation does not produce any immediate awareness of phenomenal qualities belonging to the outer object. Even if the subject employs concepts, in *taking* what they are aware of to represent some mind-independent item, no additional phenomenal awareness of outer objects is thereby generated. Neither the informational, nor the resemblance, forms of representation enable subjects to transcend their inner states of consciousness.

It may be thought that I am being unfair to the advocate of the IDR thesis. Suppose we accept that, taken on their own, the informational and resemblance forms representation do not explain the awareness of phenomenal qualities belonging to the external object. Nevertheless, it might be argued, in having an experience, the subject is aware of external qualities, simply because the subject exercises an *intentional* representational state. An intentional state by its very nature makes its owner directly conscious of its object and its qualities. In having a perceptual experience the subject intentionally represents, in a perceptual mode, the outer object, and thus becomes aware of phenomenal qualities which are intrinsic to that object.

²⁵ See my (2007) chapters 8 and 9.

²⁶ See Sellars (1956) Part XVI, and other writings, and Lowe (1995) chapter 3.

This takes us to the third conception of representation, and to the heart of the dispute between IDR and the Sellarsian view. The question we are concerned with is one that engages with metaphysical questions about the proper way to analyse the intentional nature of perception, and at the same time to make sense of the phenomenological facts about the nature of first-person experience in perceiving an object. The central objection to the IDR thesis is that the appeal to a *perceptual or experiential mode* of intentionality is unclear. It is a philosophical concoction based upon ingredients that do not belong together. The upholder of the IDR view needs to justify the claim that experience is a special mode of intentional representation. Experiencing an object is assumed to be a mode of representation that parallels other modes such as thinking and fearing, and so on, yet which has the special additional feature of putting the subject immediately in contact with the qualities belonging to an external object. The entitlement to this claim about the special nature of the mode of experiencing must be earned.

There are a number of problematic issues about contents of intentional states, but I want to concentrate on the phenomenological issues concerning the way that the subject's intentional awareness of the object of perception is related to an awareness of phenomenal qualities. I suggest that the clearest way to approach such questions is by first considering paradigm intentional episodes such as occurrent *thoughts*, and then to proceed by examining how these kinds of episode might throw some light on questions about the Intentionalist interpretation of *perceptual experiences*.

In having a thought, for example about Bertrand Russell, I do not think about my idea of Russell. I focus upon the man himself. In some sense it is Russell, the man, who is directly present to my mind, and not my own representational state by virtue of which I think of him. Thoughts are therefore genuinely transparent in this way. In thinking about Russell, it may be that I have to think about him in a certain way, or “under a description”.²⁷ But any accompanying verbal descriptions, or images, which I may be aware of in consciousness are only contingently connected with my having the thought.²⁸ Its content is independent of any other mental goings on, and in particular of the existence of any phenomenal state of which I am immediately aware. There need be nothing essentially present to consciousness when I think about Russell. When my thought reaches right to its object, this is not because that object is manifested in my consciousness in some mysterious non-phenomenal way. It is because nothing intervenes in consciousness between my thought and its object. The content of my thought is in part determined by the thought's relation to some external state of affairs, but that state of affairs need have no existence in my current consciousness. This point

²⁷ See in particular Anscombe (1967) and Evans (1982) ch 1.

²⁸ This is not to deny Kripkean insights about the way external factors contribute to determining reference. I may need to defer to other members of my community; other matters about my context, which are outside my direct cognitive grasp, can also be relevant to specifying the reference of my thoughts. See Kripke (1980), especially footnote 38.

is made obvious in cases where I think about some past event relating to an object no longer in existence, or to some future wished for event, concerning an object yet to exist. In such cases the object I am thinking about need have no existence at the time I am thinking about it.

It follows that the *directedness* of intentional states is not to be explained by the actual *presence* of any object, or any set of properties (whether instantiated or uninstantiated) to the mind. Paradoxically, it arises from the *absence* of an awareness of anything phenomenal immediately present to the mind. Thoughts are dispositional. In forming a thought about an object I exercise capacities that enable me to go on in appropriate ways, in thinking further thoughts in connection with it, or in carrying out plans for activity involving the object.²⁹ A thought makes direct contact with its object because it is unmediated. Intentional consciousness is therefore phenomenologically very different from the type of consciousness involved when I am aware of phenomenal qualities.

These observations indicate that the directedness of paradigm intentional episodes such as thoughts is a not feature of consciousness that is founded upon the awareness of phenomenal states. The kind of consciousness that is involved when a subject is immediately aware of phenomenal qualities is of a very different kind. For this reason, it is hard to see how our subjective grasp of intentional representation can help us to understand the kind of consciousness involved in having a perceptual experience. It does not explain how the representational nature of perceptual experience enables the subject to be immediately aware of phenomenal qualities belonging to the external mind-independent object.

There is a complication here in that phenomenal qualities do indeed have some role to play in experience; in perception, they are not idle accompaniments of the representational component of experience. But it is important to note that in perception there is a disparity between the way that an object perceived is taken, objectively to exist, and the subjective appearance that it manifests. The intentional aspect of perception involves low-level classificatory activity, focused directly on objective features of the world. In so far as there is any awareness of phenomenal qualities in perception, these qualities relate only to the subjective appearances of things. Such states are not what our concepts refer to. They do not reflect the object as it is conceived through the intentional component of perception.

Cases of blindsight show that successful action directed at objects in egocentric space is independent of phenomenal awareness. This experimental finding is significant. It shows that the link between phenomenal experience and any intentional episodes may well be of a looser kind than that envisaged on the Intentionalist view of experience. It makes sense to view the intentional directedness and the phenomenal awareness as two distinct, causally connected components. The role of phenomenal states consists in

²⁹ This point is independent of whether in forming a thought I am exercising “high” or “low” concepts.

guiding future expectations about objects. They causally prompt the formation of concepts relating to how things objectively are; the occurrence of such concepts, through the exercise of the productive imagination, in turn prepares subjects for responding to the different ways their experiences of the objects perceived might develop through time, as a result of action. (Such ideas are developed in Sellars's important paper on the role of the imagination in experience.³⁰) On this conception, the intentional and phenomenal aspects of any token experience are still considered to be logically independent.

These reflections on the nature of representation strongly suggest that a state of perceptual consciousness cannot perform both the roles required of it on the IDR account. Perceptual experiences represent external objects, and in the normal veridical case they do so successfully. But they do not, simply by virtue of their representational nature, convey the phenomenal qualities of external objects into the immediate consciousness of the subject; they do not make such qualities immediately present in a sensory form.

As we have noted, perceptual experience comprises both an intentionally directed element, and also the immediate awareness of phenomenal qualities. The phenomenal component of the inner experience may represent some outer object because it resembles it, or because it carries information about it. In neither case does the representative character of the *inner experience* depend upon the subject having a phenomenal awareness of qualities of the *outer object* that is represented. An experience may also represent the perceived object by virtue of an *intentional* state that is an essential component of that experience, a state that exists in addition to the phenomenal qualities manifested. But as the above reflections show, this does not entail that the physical object directly perceived is the same entity as that to which the phenomenal qualities belong. Nor does it imply that the subject's own intentional episode, by virtue of which the overall experience has an intentional object, is the bearer of the phenomenal qualities. It is not even clear whether such a claim would make sense, given the dispositional nature of intentional episodes. It makes better sense to view the intentional nature and the phenomenal character of experience as arising from two distinct, though interconnected, components.

5 *Sellars's Two Component Theory of Experience*

As we noted at the outset, the thesis that the intentional representational component of perceptual experience is distinct from the phenomenal component is essential to Sellars's Critical Realist theory of perception. According to the Critical Realist view, perceptual experiences are inner states, causally related to the outer physical object which is the focus of the perceiver's visual attention. There are two components involved in a perceptual experience:

³⁰ See Sellars (1982). I discuss the essential role of the imagination in respect of the phenomenological unity of consciousness in chapter 9 of my (2007).

- (i) The first component is an intentional episode involving the exercise of concepts, normally of a low-level, classificatory kind;
- (ii) The second component belongs to a different order, and involves a distinctive phenomenal, or sensory, component: an immediate (nonconceptual) awareness of phenomenal qualities.

In having a visual experience, for example, in seeing a red juggling ball, the subject's conceptual focus is constituted by a "perceptual taking" – a low-level classificatory state directed straight on to the physical object that, in the veridical case, is usually situated in the local environment. In exercising low-level classificatory concepts we categorise what we take to be present as belonging to a kind. The perceptual taking is not inferred from any prior conceptual state. Nor is it *about* the subject's phenomenal state: rather, it is *caused and guided* by the phenomenal aspect of experience. So in seeing a red ball *as* a red ball the subject is nonconceptually aware of a red visual expanse (an *inner* phenomenal state), but is directly caused to form the perceptual taking focussed upon the *outer* physical object seen:

'This red ball is ... (suitable for juggling, etc.) ...'

Accordingly, the Critical Realist model of experience views the two aspects of experience as distinct, though interrelated, components. The phenomenal qualities belong to the sensation, or experience (understood in a narrow sense), and instantiate states or events in consciousness that endure through time. The intentional component of experience is a type of disposition, involving the exercise of capacities relating to the way the subject responds to the phenomenal states that result from sensory input. Hence the intentional aspect of experience is not itself an event *in* consciousness in the same way that phenomenal states are. However, a *change* of intentional state – for example, when the subject recognises that the object sitting nearby is a dog – is an event, one which may trigger changes in conscious states, for example by causing inner auditory word images – token sentences in the stream of consciousness – expressing the subject's perceptual taking: 'That dog is...a spaniel, friendly, etc'.

The Critical Realist view is thus opposed to the IDR position. According to the latter view, in virtue of having a visual intentional episode, the subject is made directly aware of the phenomenal qualities belonging to its object, observable physical properties belonging to the physical things in the surroundings that the subject sees. From the Critical Realist standpoint, this account gets matters the wrong way round. We should say, instead, that by virtue of being in a conscious state which involves the awareness of

phenomenal qualities (qualities that belong to inner states, according to the Critical Realist), the subject is prompted to form intentional episodes. The phenomenal qualities belong to inner states. The intentional episodes, however, involve the exercise of conceptual capacities – perceptual takings of a low-level kind – that refer to the outer objects which exist in the subject’s surroundings. Such takings intentionally represent, in an objective manner, the way things are; they are not, in the normal case, focused upon the subjective appearance of objects. The phenomenal states guide the subject’s thoughts about objective reality, but are distinct from the perceived object; in addition, through the work of the productive imagination, they prepare the subject for further changes in the overall pattern of experience.³¹

This leads on to questions about how we are to determine the contents of experience. If the perceived object is not immediately present in experience, what entitles us to claim that a particular object X is seen when the subject has an inner experience E? An indefinitely large number of external objects contribute causally to the occurrence of E, by various different causal routes. So the problem arises, on what basis can we say that this object X is the one which the experience is *of*? In order to answer this question, and to enable us to become clearer about the different contents of experience, I need first to say something about the way that causality is connected with perception, by outlining a “Navigational Account” of perception that I have defended in other work.³² This account focuses upon the essential role of perceptual processes play in enabling organisms to survive.

6 *The Navigational Account of Perception:*

According to the Navigational Account of perceiving, a person’s grasp of distance perception is based on an implicit understanding of its role in enabling the subject of experience to acquire knowledge of distal objects, in a form that enables the subject to navigate through a moderately stable environment, and to engage with objects in the surroundings and make beneficial use of them. Perception is a dynamic process, and plays an essential role in enabling creatures to interact with the objects in their environment, in order to satisfy their needs (and also to avoid harm).

Navigational activity, as understood on a Critical Realist account of perception, takes place when a subject perceives some distal object, and chooses a path through the surroundings in order to reach that object and make beneficial use of it. It is through the essential use of distance perception that humans and other creatures are able, with a fair degree of success, to move around the environment, and hence to act upon distal objects. Such activity cannot be explained in terms of direct stimulus-response.³³ It involves prior planning, based upon the experience, and assessment, of the physical layout of the surrounding scene. Distance perception enables the subject to select, in

³¹ As Sellars argues in the important late paper (1978).

³² In my (2007), chapters 6 and 7.

³³ See Clark (2001).

advance, which route to navigate, in order to reach and make direct physical contact with the object initially observed and conceptualized as belonging to a given kind.

In navigating through a scene, the subject's experiences will be causally connected with their surroundings. Only certain kinds of underlying causal mechanisms will support the right kind of co-variation of scene and experience through time, so as to allow the subject to successfully steer through an environment. If there is a causally connected sequence of events, initiated by an external object, and leading to experiences, which then produces successful navigational activity, this sequence constitutes the mechanism essential for perception, for that subject. This core navigational conception of the function of seeing and other forms of distance perception is understood by scientists who investigate the process; this is made clear, for example, in the important work of Milner and Goodale.³⁴

There is therefore a principled basis for distinguishing between the types of causal connections that are appropriate for normal seeing, and those abnormal situations where "deviant causal chains" give rise to coincidentally matching experiences. In the many cases constructed in the philosophical literature about deviant causal chains, subjects are caused, via bizarre routes, to have experiences which match items in their surroundings. Many such examples, however, tend to consider such states of experience in an isolated, static manner, divorced from behaviour. The deviantly caused experiences are not integrated with others that form part of the subject's overall consciousness; they cannot serve to guide the subject's actions over a period of time. Once we consider the dynamic role of experience, it becomes clear that what matters about visual experiences, and the like, is not their actual phenomenal character, but the function they have, in enabling the subject to embark upon and complete successful actions. This is why colour blind subjects often do not recognise their deficit until relatively late on in life; for the most part they are able to distinguish objects, and act on them, even though their vision is not the same as that of the majority of sighted subjects. Successful navigational activity constitutes a principled basis for selecting the optimal circumstances for identifying the causal connections essential to perceiving. What we call "normal seeing" is to be analysed in part by reference to the kind of causal link that allows successful action upon objects.

These claims about the essential navigational role of perception, when combined with the dual-component account of experience, suggests a way of approaching issues connected with the contents of experience. We can abstract from the particular scientific details of the causal connection between experience and perceived object. Where there is successful navigational activity on the part of the subject, the object which is seen (or otherwise perceived) plays a unique *dual role*: the object which is seen not only initiates the subject's activity – subject to the existence of the appropriate desires on the part of the subject – but it also acts as the *focus* for the subsequent extended pattern of action.

³⁴ Milner and Goodale (1995).

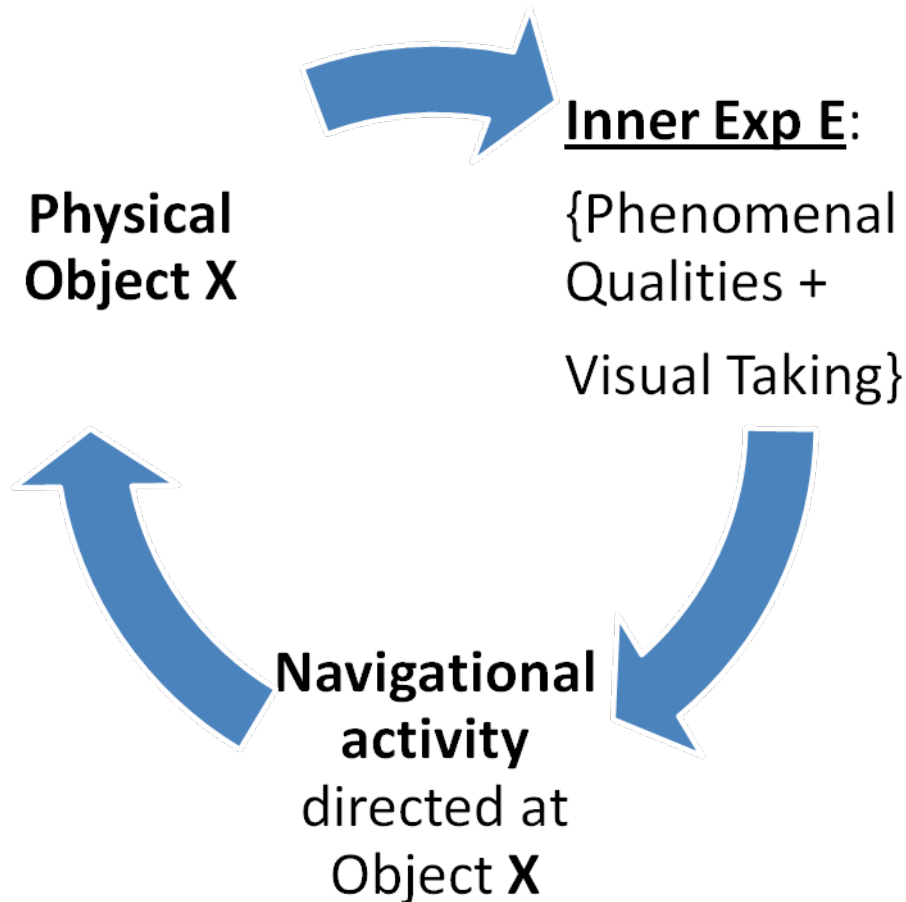
The perceived object occupies a key position in the overall causal network, so that it and the surrounding objects can provide a continuous stream of information about the spatial layout of the scene. This in turn enables the subject to select the right route through the environment; the navigational activity is terminated when the subject finally arrives at the object initially perceived, and makes use of it by direct physical contact.

If this account is correct, it solves two problems. We are given principled grounds for claims about the nature of the causal relation necessary for perception. We are also provided with a means of accounting for the contents of perceptual experience, by reference to the specific object that would play the dual role in initiating, and terminating navigational activity. This is not to claim that the perception of an object always leads to such activity, but rather that the type of causal relation essential to genuine perception can be identified by reference to paradigm cases involving such behaviour, when it takes place.

The resulting model of perceptual experience is illustrated, in diagram (2), for the modality of seeing. The curved arrows represent causal connections. In the paradigm case, the object X seen by the perceiver triggers activity making use of that object. The particular object X that is seen plays the unique double causal role, as both the object initially prompting the inner experience E which the subject S is conscious of, and also as the focus of the subsequent navigational activity, which terminates when the subject S makes beneficial use of X. The dynamic nature of perception is accommodated on this model, since there is a continuous causal loop, as the subject constantly updates aspects of the way X is presented (by mediating phenomenal states) and represented in experience. The perspectival appearance of X changes, although the master thoughts central to the subject's navigational activity, about the objective nature and location of X, may remain approximately constant. Such master thoughts govern the subject's extended plan of action in making use of X.³⁵

Diagram 1:

³⁵ As I discuss in my (2007); note again Clark (2001).



Hence there is an iterable causal sequence of the general form: Subject S looks towards X; X causes an initial inner experience E1 in S, at time 1; in the circumstances, given an appropriate set of overall background desires and intentions, S forms a plan of activity directed at obtaining X (or otherwise making use of X); such activity leads to a shift in position relative to X, and a further, updated, inner experience E2 in seeing X, at time 2, which in turn helps to further guide S's movements through the surroundings, so as to reach X; and so on. The unique double role of X in this overall sequence of events determines it as the material object of perception for the subject who has, or would have, the relevant action guiding experiences in the paradigm situation.

7 *Representation and the Multiple Contents of Experience:*

When we combine the Sellarsian two-component view of experience with the navigational account of perception, it becomes clear why experiences have *multiple* contents: experiences represent the world in more than one way. A full account of the contents of experience would take up a number of issues, some of which relate to more

formal aspects of questions concerning content.³⁶ I make no attempt to provide an exhaustive account here. The focus remains on the question of how best to make sense of the relationship between the different representational aspects of an experience and its phenomenal character.

If the navigational account is correct, there is a principled way of determining the informational content of experiences, by reference to the causal mechanisms involved in successful navigational behaviour. These enable us to determine which object the experience is *of*. If it is also true that experiences have two distinct components, then the following general account of the multiple contents of perceptual experience becomes plausible:

- (i) Perceptual experiences are complex inner states. By virtue of their including a nonconceptual component, the subject is immediately aware of *phenomenal qualities*;
- (ii) Such inner states of awareness of phenomenal qualities are caused in a manner which supports paradigm cases of successful navigation. In addition to having a phenomenal character, they *informationally represent* the external objects that so cause them;
- (iii) In having an experience, the subject is not aware, in any immediate phenomenal sense, of the external objects perceived and their properties;
- (iv) Nevertheless, the subject's experiences contain a second component, whereby the subject is prompted to form *perceptual takings* directed onto external objects.
- (v) Through the exercise of low-level concepts in the perceptual taking, the subject directly *represents*, in a conscious *intentional* sense, the external physical object assumed to be physically present. The subject "takes" that object *as* an object of a certain kind, and is thus able to form a demonstrative *thought* about that object³⁷

³⁶ Seigel (2005) contains a useful discussion of these issues. The idea that perceptual experiences have multiple contents is also defended in an interesting paper by Chalmers (2006). I plan to take up issues connecting with Chalmers's account in a further paper on this topic.

³⁷ I argue in my 'Experience, Imagination and Demonstrative Reference' (forthcoming) that it is possible to explain how the subject's perceptual thought can succeed in latching on to the perceived object without appeal to spurious notions of "acquaintance", understood in a Russellian sense.

An account of content emerges straightforwardly when, in the light of this analysis, we consider the sorts of claims that can be made about perceptual experiences. Intuitively, when we are seeking a full account of a subject's experience, there are several different kinds of question that we can raise about its nature. These invite different forms of answer, depending upon which aspect of the experience is the focus of the enquiry.

Consider a subject S who sees a red apple on a nearby tree. Firstly, there is the question: which object does S see? From an external standpoint, we can identify the specific object the subject sees, and thus what the experience is *of* in the extensional sense – we can say which particular apple the subject is seeing, and also what its observable properties are. The subject's experiences represent the apple seen in an informational sense.

The particular object that is seen, the apple that the visual experience is *of*, is the object that causes the experience by the appropriate causal route which would support navigational behaviour. The phenomenal aspects of the experience also represent (again, in an informational sense) the types of sensible properties that normally cause that kind of experience to occur as an inner state. In this sense, we can speak of the objective features that the experience is *of* – such as an experience of a red, roundish apple, or the smell of mint, etc.³⁸ As we noted above, the meaning of 'normally' here can be identified by reference to the correlations that occur when subjects are able to carry out successful navigational behaviour. Content of this external kind can be classified as "Russellian".³⁹ The Russellian, *informational* content of experiences is fundamentally backward looking, to be accounted for by reference to what causes the phenomenal state to come about. It is determined by matters outside the immediate cognitive grasp of the subject.

By contrast, the *intentional* representational content of experience belongs to matters within the cognitive grasp of the subject. We can ask: in having a visual experience, what sort of object did the perceiver take to be present? This question relates to claims often expressed in terms of *seeing as* and *seeing that*. Experiences involve classificatory concepts of some kind, exercised in perceptual takings, which play an essential role in the subject's formulation of plans for extended action. The subject's perceptual taking might be of the form: 'That apple ... looks good to eat.' This taking has a representational content that is forward looking; it is responsible for the "directedness" of conscious experience. It is connected with what subjects understand, and are inclined to believe – perhaps mistakenly – on the basis of their experiences, and how they are prepared to act.⁴⁰ *Intentional* content of this kind derives from the subject's exercise of

³⁸ There are complex questions here about exactly what kind of property is picked out when we refer to the objective kind that is seen in this sense. Compare, for example, Jackson (1998), and Hardin (2003).

³⁹ Compare Chalmers (2006).

⁴⁰ This aspect of content is related to, but not the same as that which Chalmers describes as the "Fregean content" of experience.

both individual and general concepts. It is connected with plans for actions that would be successful when beneficial use is made of the type of object taken to be present.

Finally, we may enquire about how things appear, subjectively, to the perceiver in seeing the red apple. Experiences and beliefs differ fundamentally, as was noted at the outset. The difference is to be accounted for by the fact that, in addition to its representational aspects, experiences have a *phenomenal character*. As the arguments of section four above have shown, the precise informational and intentional representational contents of an experience leave open questions about such phenomenal character. What it is like, from the first-person perspective, to have the experience of seeing the red apple, and to have an awareness of phenomenal qualities, is a further aspect of experience, over and above its various forms of representational content. A colour blind person will have a different phenomenal awareness from that of a subject who is normally sighted. Informational content is compatible with the absence of any awareness of phenomenal character; moreover, spectrum inversion possibilities seem to show that informational content could not, in any event, determine the phenomenal character that the subject is aware of from the first-person perspective.⁴¹

It follows that, in addition to having informational and intentional *representational* contents, experiences have a third type of content, understood in the broad sense of the term. This aspect of content relates to the subjective, *phenomenal character* of the appearance – to the subject's inner state. It is what philosophers who speak of the phenomenal, or non-epistemic, sense of 'looks' have in mind; it is also relevant to the proper treatment of certain kinds of illusions. The representational contents of experience concern outer physical objects. But, contrary to the IDR thesis, the representational aspects of experience do not yield any immediate phenomenal awareness of the external object.

8 Conclusion:

When perceiving a physical object, the subject is consciously aware of phenomenal qualities; these qualities belong to an inner state that is one component of the subject's experience. This inner state informationally represents the object seen, and its observable characteristics. However, in a distinct, conceptual sense, the experience also represents the object that the subject takes to be present. This second form of representation arises from the second component of experience, an intentional episode, the subject's perceptual taking, which employs some form of conscious classification. If the situation is a normal veridical one, then how the subject intentionally represents the perceived object will coincide with its real nature. The subject will therefore intentionally represent an object that *matches* the material object physically present, which the phenomenal component represents in an informational manner. As Kant (and Sellars) understood, there are two kinds of consciousness unified in perception, through

⁴¹ See Block (2003); although compare Tye (2000) chapter 6.

the productive imagination. The consciousness of phenomenal qualities is an aspect of experience which is distinct from the act of intentionally representing the external object. The intentional act does not bring about a *phenomenal* awareness of properties of the external objects. It is a conceptual episode of some kind, one that is caused and guided by the subject's awareness of phenomenal qualities. Those phenomenal qualities belong to inner states, and are not to be confused with the external properties of the object taken to be physically present, and of which the subject is aware directly, in the intentional sense. These conclusions restate the thesis set out at the beginning of the paper: the phenomenal qualities of which the subject is aware in perception are not made present to the mind by virtue of the subject's intentional representational episode.

Department of Philosophy
School of Humanities
University of Hertfordshire
College Lane, Hatfield
Herts, UK: AL10 9AB
p.coates@herts.ac.uk

Paul Coates

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